



**National Alliance for  
Public Charter Schools**

**TESTIMONY OF NELSON SMITH, PRESIDENT,  
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Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and Committee members. My name is Nelson Smith, and I'm the President and CEO of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today as you seek ways to address the many challenges facing public schools here in Michigan.

My purpose today is to provide a snapshot of the state of the public charter school movement nationally and to show how public charter schools are playing an increasingly vital role in the nation's efforts to improve public education.

First, let me say a word about the National Alliance. We are a national nonprofit committed to advancing the charter school movement. Our three primary functions are: (1) to advocate for improved federal and state policies for charter schools; (2) to build the capacity of state charter associations and resource centers as they support the growth of high-quality charter schools; and (3) to share information about public charter schools with parents, communities, policymakers, media, and the education community.

Across the country, public charter schools are answering parents' increasing demands for more public school options. The number of public charter schools has grown quickly since the first one was established in Minnesota in 1992. There are now more than 4,300 charter schools in 40 states and the District of Columbia serving about 1.3 million students. Between 300 and 400 new schools are opening every year, and 100,000 to 150,000 new students are enrolling in charters each year.

Although charters serve a higher percentage of low-income students and students of color than non-charter public schools, they are proving to be popular with families in all types of communities – urban, suburban, and rural. And there's a backlog of students waiting to enroll in charter schools, but unable to do so because of restrictions on charter growth. Sixty-one percent of charter schools across the country report waiting lists averaging 149 students, enough to fill over 1,100 new public charter schools.

Public charter schools share a common ideal of being independent public schools freed to innovate in exchange for being held accountable for improved student achievement. They are permitted the autonomy to use innovative combinations of teaching, scheduling, governing, and budgeting methods that are more closely calibrated to improving student achievement. However, they must operate within a multi-tiered accountability system, answering not only to state standards but also to their authorizing bodies, to the parents that choose to

enroll their children, and even to external agents such as philanthropists and mortgage lenders, who must be confident that their investments will result in stable, high-performing schools. And like all public schools, charters are accountable to you, the state legislators who enact the laws that create and govern them.

Public charter schools are raising the bar about what's possible – and what should be expected – in public education. Charter schools are usually among the top performers in school districts. These high performers are setting important examples about what public schools can achieve, often with disadvantaged students. They're shattering low expectations and breaking through long-standing barriers that have prevented large numbers of students from achieving educational success.

With each successive study that tracks student performance over time (as opposed to just taking a snapshot of performance at one point in time), we are able to say with increasing confidence two things: One, charter schools typically enroll students who are farther behind academically than their peers who stay in non-charter public schools; and two, charters typically improve their students' performance at a faster rate than their non-charter peers. Combined, these two findings affirm that charter schools are closing the achievement gaps that have persisted too long in our educational systems.

We also know that public charter schools improve with age. We recently analyzed 14 studies regarding student performance at schools over time and found in 10 that as charter schools mature, their students' academic performance improves.

Let me share with you a few success stories from cities where charters have played a major role in improving urban public education: New York City, Washington, D.C., and New Orleans.

In New York City, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein have supported the growth of high-quality public charter schools as one of the pillars of their significant efforts to improve the city's school system. They've worked to attract and support top-notch charter schools by providing start-up funds, special education assistance, and facility space. They've also worked to apply the principles of chartering throughout the entire system by giving principals at traditional schools more autonomy in exchange for increased accountability.

Not only are charters consistently outperforming non-charters in the city, but traditional public schools are also performing at a higher level than in years past. In many ways, charters are the tide that's lifting all boats. According to Chancellor Klein, "At their core, charter schools embody the three ingredients

that are necessary for any successful school – leadership, autonomy, and accountability.”

Washington, D.C. is home to the nation’s second largest concentration of public school students in charter schools. This year, 37% of the city’s public school students are enrolled in charter schools. Washington benefits from one of the nation’s best charter laws, which includes a non-district authorizer, equitable operations funding, significant autonomy, and per-pupil facilities funding. The non-district authorizer – the D.C. Public Charter School Board (PCSB) – has been a particularly critical component of the city’s charter movement. A recent federal government report highlighted two important aspects of the charter board’s oversight practices: (1) the charter board exerts additional oversight on new charter schools and those where problems had been identified and (2) the charter board grants more flexibility to well-managed schools. It has also closed low-performing charters.

Washington Mayor Adrian Fenty and Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee have leveraged the existence of charters to make necessary and dramatic changes in the city’s traditional public schools. They’ve fired more than 50 principals and assistant principals, closed 23 under-enrolled schools, and mandated academic reforms at 26 others. As in New York City, the charters are the highest performing sector of public schools in D.C., but the traditional public schools are also improving their performance, particularly after the first year of Fenty’s and

Rhee's leadership. Significantly, Chancellor Rhee has repeatedly supported the District's charter movement to political leaders who suggest curbing it. In her view, charters provide significant positive competition and leverage for her own reform efforts.

Lastly, New Orleans has become the epicenter of public charter schooling in this country. After the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, state and local officials decided to rebuild the city's school system by relying heavily on the creation of high-quality public charter schools. This year, 56% of the city's public school students are enrolled in charters. While it's early in the rebuilding process, the charter sector is the highest performing in the city. More importantly, the city's public schools as a whole are already outperforming the pre-Katrina system.

Notwithstanding such successes, we know that not all charters succeed. We also know that charters as a sector in some states are underperforming. While we want all public charter schools to be successful, the model recognizes the reality that performance will differ. It is an essential element of the charter model to give each school the support it needs to succeed – but if it chronically fails students, to revoke the charter. The Alliance is clear on this point: Continued growth of the charter movement will only happen if we continually improve the quality of what we offer in the educational marketplace.

But to ensure the greatest degree of success possible for more charters, and to attract the best and brightest into the charter sector, we must devote equally strong attention to creating a supportive environment for chartering. Such environments include several factors, such as:

- The partial or complete lifting of arbitrary caps on charter growth.  
Seventeen years after passage of the nation's first charter law, it's become clear that artificial limits on charter expansion do not ensure quality, but instead limit access to high-quality public school choices for the students and families who are demanding them. State policymakers must provide the resources, oversight, and accountability that helps charter schools thrive – and not artificially restrict charter growth.
- Competent authorizers that establish rigorous application processes, firm but supportive oversight mechanisms, and reliable, transparent processes for funding and renewal.
- Equitable funding systems that provide parity in operations and facility dollars between charter and non-charter public schools.

While we are encouraged by the successes that we're seeing in state after state and city after city, obstacles remain. The charter school community needs to help high-quality charters replicate, assist struggling charters that can be turned around, and close chronically low-performing charters. And states and cities

need to continue to improve the policy environments to better support charter success.

I remain confident that the charter community as well as state and city leaders will successfully face these challenges. As a result, public charter schools will continue to fundamentally change public education as we know it for the better, particularly for those students too often left behind.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today, and I welcome any questions at this time.

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